ON PRAYER

1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

November 3, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Job 23:1-7
Mark 10:46-52

"Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'"

-Mark 10:48 (NRSV)

The trouble with religion is that it is so predictable, so familiar. Familiarity may breed contempt, as the old saying goes, but it also breeds blindness. See something beautiful every day, and if you are not careful, you will stop seeing the beauty. It's not uncommon. People who live here don't stand around gawking up at the Hancock Building, a striking architectural accomplishment. We're used to it. People who live in the mountains of New England forget how incredibly beautiful the autumn leaves are until out-of-staters remind them. If you drive by it every day on the way to work, the Grand Canyon, someone said, becomes just a very big hole in the ground. Familiarity can breed blindness.

And so in religion...

> "Praise ye, the lord, the Almighty,...Hast thou not seen how thy desires e'er have been, granted in what he ordainth?
>
> "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid..."
>
> "I believe in God the Father Almighty..."

We make these incredible assertions week after week; propositions which on the face of things are wildly improbable; ideas which if true are the most important ideas around. But they are so familiar, so ho-hum.

Professor Walter Brueggemann says that our religion is a "truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced." [Finally Comes

the Poet, p. 1] There is, he says, "a casual, indifferent readiness, even in our increasingly secularized society, to grant the main claims of the Gospel - not to grant them importance, but to accept them as premises of the religious life."

And so, as the music stops and the lights go down and the holy hush descends in this place, my fervent prayer is always: "Startle us O God! Startle us with the wild improbability of what we say we believe. Startle us with the incredible beauty and goodness of the affirmations this place, and our being in it, this morning represent."

Fred Craddock, one of the very best teachers of preaching, and most astute analysts of public religion, talks a lot about boredom,..."a product of over-familiarity."

> "Some listeners in churches have accepted boredom as one of the crosses that come with commitment, but I cannot. Boredom is not just a condition that prompts humorous stories about this stale profession or that dull preacher. Boredom is a form of evil. Boredom is a preview of death if not itself a form of death and when trapped in boredom, even the most saintly of us will hope for, pray for, or even engineer relief however demonic. Sincere Sunday worshipers will confess to welcoming in muffled celebration any interruption of the funereal droning. Be honest, have you ever quietly cheered when a child fell off a pew or a bird flew in a window or the lights went out or the organ wheezed or the sound system picked up police calls or a dog came down the aisle and curled up to sleep below the pulpit?"

Craddock tells about a clergy friend of his, a gentle and good man, who went to the Indianapolis 500, and after two hours his boredom turned him into a degenerate sinner. "The demon of boredom had transformed him." [Overhearing the Gospel, p. 13]

I've seen it happen. Behind many a school behavior problem is simple boredom. Teachers have to learn the difficult art of keeping everybody engaged - the slower ones on task and the quicker ones not bored. If it doesn't work the quicker ones will make life miserable. I've seen it. For years I sat in a pew beside my father, a railroader who lived by a railroad time table and a pocket watch on a chain, was easily bored, and when the sermon went too long, took his railroader's watch out of his pocket a few times and looked at it and then finally wound it, a sound easily audible all over the Sanctuary. My mother was mortified. My brother and I thought it was hilarious which, in retro-

spect, is surely most of why he did it. The demon of boredom had transformed him!

Familiarity breeds boredom and blindness in life... in human relationships... in religion too.

Jesus of Nazareth had spent the last three years of his life teaching a new way of relating to God, proclaiming God's incredibly inclusive love to anyone who would listen, and in the name and spirit of that love healing the sick. He had recruited a small cadre of men and women to learn from him so that they could carry on after he was gone. He spent most of his time, in fact, telling them and showing them what to do. After three years he decided to go to Jerusalem where his teaching and proclaiming and healing would not be nearly as welcome as in his home territory of Galilee. In fact, it will be dangerous. He knows that for him, it may be the end.

From the perspective of discipleship and what it means to be a follower of Jesus, it is the pivotal moment. We've been thinking about it on and off for two months, this moment when friends of Jesus have to look deeply inside themselves and decide whether to turn back to the safety and security of home or take the fateful step of following to Jerusalem.

And just at this moment, the writer of the first account, Mark, tells two startling stories, which in fact, are really two parts of one larger story.

The first is so human it's embarrassing. Jesus has just decided to go to Jerusalem and to confront the city, the power structure, and to accept the outcome. The way to Jerusalem is the way to the cross. He has told them that he is willing to die. It is a powerful and defining moment, and at that very moment two of them, James and John, ask him to give them places of power and honor just in case he ends up in control of Jerusalem. And it sets off a bitter argument among all his followers. Familiarity had bred blindness.

And then the second story: the last incident before he enters Jerusalem.

They were leaving Jericho and having demonstrated their blindness to the significance of what he is doing and what they are doing by following him, they walked by an authentically blind man sitting beside the road begging, a man who had probably been sitting there for years and was a familiar sight to travelers, situated as he was just outside the gate.

But this time, instead of asking for money, the man whose name was Bartimaeus, shouts, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!"

That's a switch. It's different, a little frightening actually, and very presumptuous. After all, it's a high and holy moment. And there is always a possibility that his blindness sugnifies God's judgement. And so everybody, indignant at his rudeness, "sternly orders him to be quiet," tells him to shut up. But Bartimaeus is not about to be put off, so he yells even louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me." Unlike the ones who are familiar with Jesus, who know intellectually the gravity of the moment but whose familiarity has blinded them to its significance, Bartimaeus, to his everlasting credit, knows exactly what this moment might mean for him and will not miss it. He will not shut up.

And then the miracle happens. Jesus hears him. Calls him. Asks him what he wants. "Let me see again," Bartimaeus says, and Jesus responds: "Your faith has made you well," and Bartimaeus saw.

"Your faith has made you well." That is, your impatience, your presumptuousness, your determination to get a hearing, your pushiness, has made you well.

It is a wonderful definition of faith. And, I am proposing this morning that it is a good initial understanding of prayer, starting the conversation, an insistent expression of pain, and a presumptuous demand for attention.

Our praying is so predictable, so polite and structured. Some have said that it is trivial chatter, a recitation of euphemisms, not much of an improvement over the silence that we neither believe nor understand.

Professor Brueggmann points out the great scriptural tradition that when the primal silence between God and human beings is finally broken by praying, what is said first is impatience, pain, anger. It's not the kind of praying we do but the Psalter is full of human indignation.

> "How long, O Lord? Will you
> forget me forever?
>
> "How long must I bear pain?
> consider and answer me..." [Psalm 13]

Did you hear the impatience in that?

And Job, coming to God in his devastation...

> "Today, also my complaint is bitter.
> Oh, that I might know where I might find him." [23:1]

Do you hear the anger?

"Jesus son of David, have mercy on me!"

Do you hear the years of pain and rage?

Brueggemann points out that there is no communion without communication, without speech... that silence between people is deadening, and boring; and that healing happens only when pain is spoken. Throughout the spirituality of the Psalms, reconciliation with God, peace, wholeness and healing happen only when human frustration and rage and impatience are first fully expressed.

We know the psychological truth of that. We know that unspoken resentment and anger between two people who want to love each other is destructive and can be fatal. Marriage counselors know about a kind of silence which itself is an eloquent expression of hostility. "What's wrong?" "Nothing. Absolutely nothing!" "Can we talk about it?" "There's nothing to talk about," is a litany of deep anger and hurt that will not quickly dissipate or maybe ever dissipate until it is acknowledged and spoken.

The whole culture is suddenly learning an unwelcome but necessary lesson about sexual abuse and sexual harassment: not only that it happens, happens a lot, has happened - in the case of abuse - to perhaps one out of four girls and young women, in the case of harassment - to perhaps two-thirds of all women. What we're learning is that it happens and then it is repressed because it cannot be spoken. It will not be believed, or it will be blamed on its victim. "She was asking for it, wasn't she?" And so it is internalized, buried deep in psychic memory where it lives on, year after year, often with devasting effects on the person's ability to trust and relate wholly to others until it insists on being spoken, and then and only then is healing possible.

Absolutely essential to our relationships with people we love, and with God, is the ability to bring to speech our deepest pain, our deepest fear, our deepest need.

It takes nerve. It takes courage. It is easier with one you love to gloss over hurt and anger, to leave it unexpressed. It is far easier in our praying to use the safe euphemisms and familiar formulas.

There are a lot of reasons modern Christians have trouble with praying, and we'll think about some more of them next week, but chief among them is the simple fact that it takes courage to speak about your hurt, your pain, your need. Beyond all the empirical, logical, cause and effect barriers to prayer, there is

this human propensity to play it safe, to keep it light and pleasant.

Blind Bartimaeus had done that all his life, sat by the roadside begging, shuffling home to his filthy hovel every night with enough coins for a loaf of bread and then to bed and up again in the morning for another day of humiliation, sitting there in the isolation of his blindless, begging "alms? alms? God bless you sir." And then one day, he had had enough. There was a chance that this man, this rabbi from Nazareth, the one people were calling Messiah, might by God's grace hear him, notice him and change him. So he threw caution to the wind, threw off his secure pattern of begging and then deferring to the social standards of polite society by shutting up when told to and stood up and demanded a hearing -

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy."

John Updike, talking about his own spiritual pilgrimage, tells about the famous painters, Picasso and Matisse, both self-proclaimed atheists. Matisse had designed and decorated a chapel. Picasso had chided him. Matisse said: "Yes, I do pray: and you pray too, and you know it all too well: when everything goes badly, we throw ourselves into prayer... And you do it too. It's no good saying 'no.'" [Self Consciousness, p. 228]

I think that the most familiar words in the Bible, not so much the words themselves as the thought they represent, the human appearances they describe, are these:

"How long, O Lord? Will you
forget me forever?"

I think far deeper than any physical condition, any illness, any blindness or incapacity, you and I experience deep in our souls that abandonment which is present in the ancient words, "How long, O Lord?"

We feel spiritually inadequate in the presence of friends who seem to have an open hot-line to God.

We feel like spiritual impostors when we hear about the vivid religious experiences other people have had.

The story of Blind Bartimaeus is an invitation to say that to God, to stop repressing the feelings of hurt and anger, to start the conversation with the same determined insistence as the blind man which got Jesus' attention and which Jesus called faith.

What his insistence got him, was a hearing, and then his sight, the ability to see again... to see the world in all its

magnificence, to see the one you love again in all her beauty, to see your children, your friends, your dear ones, again, clearly; and to see him - the one who hears your cry, hears your pain and your anger.

It could happen. But you will have to start the conversation somehow. Somehow, in some way, in some act and some words that are personally and uniquely your own. You will have to insist on a hearing, have to bring to speech the content of your heart. Maybe that's what your being here means. Maybe that's why you can't forget about him.

> "Jesus, Son of David, Have mercy on me!" a blind man cried out one day.

And Jesus heard him. And restored his sight.

Amen.

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Hear us, O God. Hear our stylized praying in church and hear the inarticulate praying that goes on in the depth of our souls.

Have mercy on us... heal us... forgive us... let us see again. Amen.